

Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State

Aaron Astor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Astor, Aaron (2011) "Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.2.18

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss2/17>

Review

Astor, Aaron

Spring 2011

Marshall, Anne *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State*. University of North Carolina Press, \$35.00
ISBN 978-0-8078-3436-7

Secession after the Civil War?

Of all the latest contributions to the historiography of the Civil War, two of the most salient are the study of memory and an increasing focus on the border slave states. Though the trend toward memory study is a bit older, the two fields have clearly emerged as some of the most dynamic arenas for scholarly analysis in the field. Two high-profile books written in the last decade bear this out: David Blight's *Race and Reunion* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001) and William Freehling's *The South v. The South* (Oxford University Press, 2001). Blight's three-part model of Civil War memory – emancipationism, reconciliationism, and the Lost Cause – neatly captures the competing national narratives of post-Civil War memory and the relationship between contemporary views of race and remembrance. Widely praised by scholars for its analytical depth and breadth, *Race and Reunion* stood as the authoritative account of the chronology of Civil War memory, the mechanics of narrative construction, and the cultural connection between late 19th century politics, race, and the legacy of the Civil War. Strong as this synthesis is for much of post-war America, however, historians of the border states of Missouri and Kentucky have never found Blight's interpretive schema particularly convincing. In many ways, the memorial narratives developing in the border states revealed completely contrary dynamics than that in the "North" and Confederate "South."

As for works on the border states, much recent scholarship has focused on the causes of war, the reluctance of President Lincoln to risk border state support through general emancipation, and the critical role that the border states played in the development and execution of Union military strategy. For example, Freehling's book, aptly titled *The South vs. The South*, places the internal

struggle within Kentucky and Missouri society at the center of his analysis of Confederate defeat. Failure to obtain support in the border states, Freehling persuasively argues, was key to the Confederacy's overall vulnerability to a river-based Anaconda Plan invasion of Tennessee and the lower South. But the book never addresses the long-term implications of this internal struggle in the upper South, and how it shaped both the politics of Reconstruction and the construction of Civil War memory.

Here is where Anne Marshall's *Creating a Confederate Kentucky* alters the entire field of Civil War memory study. By highlighting Kentucky, Marshall not only reveals a compelling and surprising story of a state that "waited until after the war to secede." She also explodes the Blight model of Civil War memory and uncovers some remarkable political currents that manifested themselves far beyond the confines of the Bluegrass State. In particular, Marshall demonstrates that most white Kentucky Unionists never embraced an emancipationist vision of Civil War memory, and in fact responded to their own service with a degree of shame. Her assessment of post-Civil War violence and the development of new regional identities in Appalachian eastern Kentucky further complicate a story already rent with controversy. Finally, she forcefully argues – in a point that ironically buttresses one of Blight's key claims – that it was African Americans alone who championed the emancipationist narrative in Kentucky.

Marshall begins her study by locating the shift toward Confederate sympathy with emancipation, and especially the enlistment of Kentucky slaves in the Union army. As other historians have outlined – including this reviewer – the enrollment of black Kentuckians into the Union army shook the Unionist landscape like nothing else. The numbers – 57 percent of military age black men joined the army (far higher than any other state), the speed of enlistment in the summer of 1864, the placement of black troops on guard over local Kentucky towns; and the explicit African-American association of Union military service with claims on American citizenship place black soldier enlistment at the center of Kentucky's belated Confederate story.

What follows is a truly remarkable story. Beginning with partisan political realignments - with ex-Confederates welcomed home shortly after the war as heroes and almost immediately elected to office as Democrats – the "post-war secession" of Kentucky began. Ironically, it was the "New Departure Democrat," Henry Watterson of Louisville, who solidified this transition to Confederate identity – by rejecting the militant racism of the Bourbon Democrats but by

proclaiming Kentucky the vanguard of a rising New South. This New South would balance between the promotion of new industries and railroads – including especially coal mining and manufacturing – and the cultural veneration of Old South ideals. The juxtaposition between Watterson’s “progressive” Louisville *Courier-Journal* and James Lane Allen’s nostalgic portrayal of Bluegrass slaveholding gentility encapsulated Kentucky’s post-war Confederate spirit.

Buttressing this transition to Confederate identity was an epidemic of “Regulator” violence aimed at the ex-slave population. Most remarkable, as Marshall points out, was the way in which Northerners – and Watterson, for that matter – exploited this epidemic of violence to highlight the state’s lingering “backwardness.” For Watterson and the advocates of the New South, the violence was bad for business and cast a negative image upon a state struggling with its post-war identity. Northerners used the image of the violent Kentuckian – especially in the Appalachian East – as justification enough to exploit the natural and human resources of the state for profit. But Bluegrass and Louisville elites manipulated this violence for double ends: it helped marginalize black claims on the prerogatives of citizenship even as it justified the intervention of outside capitalists.

Marshall’s account of the development of Confederate identity through the local United Daughters of the Confederacy and serial publications like the Louisville-based *Lost Cause* receives appropriately widespread treatment as well. The breadth of cultural analysis is truly impressive here, as Marshall has thoroughly scoured the popular literature of late 19th and early 20th century Kentucky for evidence of the reification of Kentucky’s post-war Confederate identity. Similarly, her assessment of white Unionists’ “manifest aversion to the Union cause” – in large part because of discomfort with the association of Unionism in Kentucky with emancipation – bristles with irony (155). Instead of “whitening” the Unionist heritage as happened in the North, Kentucky Unionists chose to “forget” their own service and yield the Unionist memorial space to the more marginalized black population. The result was jarring on the landscape too, as large Confederate monuments were placed in key public places – including in once heavily Unionist Louisville – with virtually no Unionist counterpart monuments. Unionism had become black – and invisible – in Kentucky by 1900.

Perhaps most interesting is the way Marshall balances the Watterson-led New South case for business and industrial development in the Appalachian

coalfields in the 1890s with the old Bourbon case for Kentucky's "Southern" – in this case Confederate – identity. As such, her chapter on memory in Appalachian eastern Kentucky is the strongest chapter in an already remarkable book. First off, Marshall demonstrates that eastern Kentucky loyalties were far more complicated than the monolithic Unionist heritage that fills much of the local and national imagination. In fact, just as the rest of Kentucky developed a Confederate identity, eastern Kentucky adopted a singular Unionist heritage that belies the more complex layers of loyalty in eastern counties. What makes this so compelling, however, is what happens economically and culturally in late 19th century eastern Kentucky: the large-scale exploitation of the coalfields of the region, the construction of railroads to this previously isolated section of the state, and the cultural re-imagining of Appalachian Kentucky as a purely "white" relic of Elizabethan England. Here Marshall draws on Appalachian scholars who have long noted the shift among leading reformers in the region – Berea College's William G. Frost chief among them – from the embrace of bi-racial citizenship to the lily-white and "savage" mountaineer needing redemption. But Marshall is the first to connect this story to the larger statewide Civil War memorial movement. It becomes apparent in Marshall's reading, then, why so many journalists in Louisville and in the North identified the famous Hatfield-McCoy feuds with Civil War loyalties and not with the far more historically accurate struggle over exploitation of timber and coal resources. After all, painting Appalachian Kentucky as violent and "savage" not only justified economic and cultural exploitation of the region, but it also helped preserve the genteel Bourbon Democratic – and Confederate – identity in the rest of the state as a contrast to the chaotic east. As Appalachian historian John Inscoe has written, Appalachia was the South's "Other," and this became abundantly clear in the construction of Civil War memorial narratives in Kentucky.

Anne Marshall's *Creating a Confederate Kentucky* is a masterful work of scholarship. Its prose is lucid; its research is thorough; and its interpretative power is truly ground-breaking. In fact, one can only hope that scholars in other parts of the great "Civil War middle" – from the lower Midwest through the border states and into the upper reaches of the Confederacy – will take up the mantle and reassess how Civil War memory interacted with industrial development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After all, it was in this vast middle region – from Baltimore to West Virginia to Kentucky to Cincinnati to St. Louis and Missouri – where so much of America's post-war industrial power

would manifest itself. And there is little doubt that the sorts of complications that characterize the Kentucky story would surely appear in these other equally vexing areas of the country. It is long past time we situate the study of Civil War memory away from the Upper North and the Lower South and we turn our attention to the American heartland where most of the war was fought, and where the ideological and cultural struggles associated with the Civil War and its aftermath were as complex and influential as any other section of the country.

Aaron Astor is Assistant Professor of History at Maryville College in Maryville, Tennessee and is author of the forthcoming book Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri (Louisiana State University Press, 2012).